

Alter-Summit in Athens: A pseudo-left response to growing social opposition in Europe

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11 June 2013

Last weekend, approximately 200 European trade unions, political NGOs (non-governmental organizations), charity groups, and feminist, environmentalist and pseudo-left groupings organized a so-called Alter-Summit in Athens. The meeting endorsed the institutions of the European Union (EU), with which union bureaucracies have worked closely in negotiating and approving austerity policies since the outbreak of the European debt crisis.

On Friday and Saturday, some 1,000 people from across Europe came to the Olympia area of northern Athens to discuss in different “assemblies” such themes as social rights, ecology and education.

The summit began with a special “feminist assembly”, in which women attending the meeting gathered separately for discussion.

The turnout was much lower than the 5,000 attendees that had been expected. This reflects the bitter experience of Greece as the focal point of social counter-revolution in Europe. After numerous EU bailout packages negotiated with the Greek government and union bureaucracy, more than 60 percent of the youth are unemployed, wages have fallen by 35 to 50 per cent on average, and the education system has been smashed.

The Alter-Summit’s organizers—including many of Europe’s biggest trade unions—could not generate any genuine broader enthusiasm.

Greece’s two main union confederations, GSEE and ADEDY, have functioned as extended arms of the state, suppressing working class opposition to the cuts by trying to limit every action of the workers to brief protest strikes. When the Greek government put the striking subway drivers, seamen and teachers under

martial law to force them back to work, ADEDY and GSEE called off solidarity strikes.

The German IG Metall, the largest single trade union worldwide and one of the sponsors of the summit, had already overseen the closure of an auto plant in Germany—the Opel plant in Bochum.

Besides these organizations, the major European pseudo-left parties were active at the conference, even though they did not officially sign the initial appeal. Members of France’s New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), the German Left Party and the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) attended. Many of their affiliated organizations—the Left Party’s Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, SYRIZA member party AKOA, and the NPA-affiliated *Solidaire* trade union—helped organize the summit and signed its documents.

These organizations have played a reactionary role throughout Europe. The Left Party not only facilitated the bailout of the banks in the German parliament, it has presided over brutal social attacks in different states throughout Germany. SYRIZA is bidding to join the government in Greece, having pledged to repay the banks.

In the center of the Alter-Summit was its so-called “People’s Manifesto”, which outlines “urgent common priorities for a democratic, social, ecological and feminist Europe.”

The document is essentially the outline of an alternative austerity policy, hidden under formless proposals for “wage increases” and an “adequate minimum wage”. Coming from organizations such as the GSEE, which has helped impose one wave of EU wage cuts after another, such a demand is a cynical

ploy. It is part of an effort to hide the manifesto's anti-working class program behind demands which the Alter-Summit's organizers not only are unwilling to fight for, but are actively hostile to.

Far more significant in the "People's Manifesto" is the defense of the EU. "Rising inequalities endanger social cohesion," the manifesto states in its preface, continuing: "The very existence of the European Union is now at risk". For this reason, the authors declare "that the EU institutions must be brought under democratic control, just as the public interest must prevail and ecological and social needs be met."

This presentation of the EU as a potential guarantor of the "public interest" and "social needs" is absurd. From its founding in 1992, the EU was a tool of the ruling elite to smash the living standard of the working class, first in Eastern Europe and then throughout the continent. The brutal social attacks in Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy are carried out by its institutions.

With their defense of the EU, the summit participants reveal their response to the growing social opposition within the European population not only against austerity, but also against the EU institutions.

In the last two weeks, a slew of comments in the bourgeois press has warned against the dangers posed by growing opposition to the EU. While a UN report said the risk of "social unrest" is dramatically rising, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble spoke of the threat of "revolution."

The manifesto opposes cancelling the debts of the southern European countries, which have been the main mechanism to introduce austerity measures in these countries. Instead, it criticizes the existing credit agreement with the EU and calls for a "haircut" for holders of sovereign debt. This was carried out in Greece—with full support from the lenders, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the EU—in a move that did not ease austerity, but aimed to protect private lenders' money.

The manifesto also expresses its support for another IMF proposal—to "mandate and oblige the European Central Bank [ECB] and other public European banking institutions to lend directly to states at low interest". Having the ECB as the lender of last resort is just another way to repay major banks holding sovereign debt with freshly-printed money.

The manifesto also demands a public bailout of failed

banks—a policy the EU has already employed across Europe, to transfer bad private debts onto governments' balance sheets to justify more reactionary budget cuts. In another sign of the Alter-Summit organizers' deep hostility to socialist policies, the nationalization of banks that are not failing is explicitly ruled out.

The attempts to lend a "left" veneer to the Alter-Summit's reactionary politics by posturing as defenders of the rights of women are also deeply cynical. It is impossible to defend democratic rights on the basis of the catastrophic collapse in living standards which the Greek people have suffered. Falling wages, unemployment, and rising social misery hit the proletariat as a class—male and female, and gay and straight.

The growing social inequality in Europe must be fought through a joint struggle of all workers against social attacks. Such a struggle must be directed not only against the governments and EU institutions, but also against the petty-bourgeois groups that organized the Alter-Summit, which are objectively hostile to the workers. The decisive question is the fight for a socialist program and an independent class line for the working class.



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